

Observation Exercise:

Parks Lake

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Parks Lake is a beautiful recreation area that straddles the border between Rockaway Township and Rockaway Borough. The most prominent feature of the park is a .7-mile lighted walking path, which can be also be used for bicycling and rollerblading. Rockaway is in the heart of the New Jersey Highlands, and is quite hilly, so the flat walking path is an attractive feature. The northern end of the park, owned by Rockaway Township, features the Rotary Memorial Gazebo, which is the site of free concerts in the summer. There is also a flagpole and memorial to Rockaway Township residents who gave their lives in military service. The southern end of the park, owned by Rockaway Borough, includes a sandy beach area open to members during the summer, and a children's play area (Rockaway Township Facilities, 2017). The Park Lakes Sharks call the lake home, and have swim team docks on the lake (Rockaway Borough, 2017). In winter, there is ice skating on the lake. At any hour of the day or night, all year round, there are residents enjoying the outdoors and exercising in the park. I observed the activities at the park on a warm fall Sunday, to understand how residents utilize the facilities.

Jottings

Township side, Sunday, Oct. 1, 3:30pm

64°, Flag hanging limp on pole

Lucky to get parking near park, most people at American Legion

Great spot to observe, near gazebo

Roses in full bloom around gazebo, small flags around base, 9/11??

- Man in 30's retrieving toddler from gazebo
- Two ladies chatting and strolling
- Another two ladies chatting and strolling, grey hat and green shirt
- Man in 30's running, blue shirt, serious

- Young couple walking briskly, holding hands
- Man in 40's on cell phone
- Woman in mid-20's jogging, grey shirt, counterclockwise
- Older couple, pretty brisk pace, not talking
- Elderly man smoking e-cig, wandering about
- Young woman speed walking
- Couple in their 50's walking and posing for camera
- Young woman in blue shirt running
- Young girl walking slowly on phone, FaceTime??
- Man in 40's holding coffee on speaker phone
- Blue shirt man, lap 2
- Goth girl all in black, meandering
- Man in 50's walking at a comfortable pace
- Mom and bouncy 8-year-old girl happily walking
- 3 women (3 generations of one family?)
- Blue woman and grey woman each take another lap
- Another excited girl about 10, running with mom following
- Man in his 60's with a huge dog (With woman with purse? NO)
- Older couple 60's walking with purpose
- Grey hat green shirt ladies take another lap
- Hand-holders still walking, lap 2
- 20-year-old woman walking
- Grey shirt woman lap 3

- Blue shirt woman jogging, lap 3

3:45pm

- Mr. Speaker Phone is back
- 40-year-old Asian woman with pretty flowing blouse out for a stroll
- Man in 30's running with excited pit bull
- Another older couple 70's walking briskly
- Woman in berry sweater moving at a quick pace
- MH sweatshirt guy with SLR camera
- Grey shirt woman on lap 4
- 20's woman dressed for serious exercise at gazebo on phone (spandex girl)
- couple in 40's out for a walk
- Spandex girl runs into friends with 3 kids on their way to the playground
- 3 generation family on lap 2
- Blue shirt woman is having another lap
- Man with beautiful Eskimo dog
- Two women with stroller
- Grey hat green shirt ladies still going, lap 3
- Grey shirt woman lap 5, wow, hauling!
- Mom and two preteen daughters
- Mom and Dad with toddler retrieved earlier, squealing happily as they head for car
- Very little noise, other than birds, crickets, passing cars
- Sparrows, one big bluejay

4:00pm

- Berry woman lap 2
- Mr. Speaker Phone on lap 3
- 30-year-old man with little girl on shoulders and little boy wandering, exploring woods behind Lombardo Park sign, off to walk (hope they do a tick check)
- Blue shirt woman back again, lap 5
- Grey woman still fast, lap 6
- Goth girl is back, may just like black
- 40's couple out for lap 2
- Motorcycle behind me on street, disruptive noise
- New arrivals, couple in 70's holding hands out for a stroll
- 40's woman in pink, brisk pace walking
- Mom and teen daughter go by, mom takes bench, daughter sets off alone, then returns with grandma?? (3 gen family?)
- Hot pink couple in 60's
- Muslim family, 2 women in long skirts and veils, 2 men, 2 children, 1 on skateboard
- Grey woman passed again, lap 7
- Stroller ladies on lap 2
- Berry woman got almost to parking lot, stopped, turned around & went back

4:15pm

- 60's lady with Pomeranian arrives
- Spandex girl and her friend with baby in front carrier walking and chatting
- Man in 20's with tiny cutie

- Woman in khaki hat moving at a measured pace
- Blue woman is walking now, cool down, heading for car
- Here comes Speaker Phone man, in gazebo chatting
- Grey girl, lap 8
- Young couple with bandanna dog starting out
- Asian woman on lap 2
- Pink pants woman starting out, now on bench
- Pink shirt woman moving along, lap 2
- 30's woman with big purse
- 60's man with khaki shorts starting out
- 50's couple, woman w/ shawl walking and having a serious discussion
- Grey girl lap 9, this could be it, walking now
- Family w/ 4-year-old on razor, pink stroller, just starting out
- Young boy heads out to car, returns w/ Quik Chek bag (snacks?)
- Lady with Pom is back
- Grey girl and Berry woman heading for their cars
- Woman in 60's relaxing on bench, now heading for car
- Another woman pushing a stroller
- Speaker phone guy on phone in gazebo again
- 2 dangerous looking young boys racing on razors
- Older couple in heated discussion, arms flailing
- 50's woman w/ ponytail setting out

Busy place, not crowded

Lots of families using playground

Full Observational Notes

I observed the activity at Parks Lake on Sunday, October 1. My goal was to understand how residents used the park, and to observe their social interactions. Were residents primarily using the park for fitness, or was it more of a social activity? This observation will begin to answer that question. However, it is important to note that a similar observation during another season, weather pattern, or time of day could have different results.

The day of my observation was a beautiful fall day, with clear skies dotted with a few fluffy clouds. The temperature was a pleasant 64°, and the flag hung limp on its pole because there was no breeze. As I arrived at the northern end of the park, I was happily surprised to see an open parking spot in the small, 7-car lot immediately adjacent to the walking trail. Most patrons have to park in the large American Legion parking lot and walk across the street to Parks Lake. I selected a spot for my observation, between the Rotary Memorial Gazebo and a small stand of woods by the waters' edge. The paved walking path passed right in front of me, making it a perfect spot to observe the patrons as they enjoyed the park. Tall phragmites reeds grow all along the edge of the lake, obscuring the view of the water from my location, and making it impossible to enjoy watching the pair of swans who make the lake their home. I was also unable to view the playground because of the high reeds rimming the lake.

I began the observation at 3:30 pm, and the first person I saw was a man trying to retrieve his toddler son from the gazebo. This large wooden structure is often used on summer Sundays as the stage for free concerts, as well as a backdrop for wedding photos. Unpredictable October

weather means the venue was quiet and empty today, without a bride or a band in sight. There were over a dozen small American flags planted in the soil around the base of the gazebo, perhaps a remnant of the recent 9/11 commemoration. The man finally prevailed, and the two set out down the walking path together. They were not seen again for almost an hour, when they returned from the direction of the playground with a woman who appeared to be the mother of the toddler. Several other families disappeared from my sight as they made their way to the playground. In two different cases, little girls were so excited to get to the play structure that they bounded along the path, followed by their adult companions who moved at a much slower pace. Some of the boys rode razor scooters along the path, while others stayed close to their parents as they walked to the southern end of the park.

Many pairs of walkers were spotted throughout the hour, strolling along and carrying on animated conversations. Some intense couples walked briskly, side by side, without speaking, as if they were concentrating on maximizing their exercise. Other couples used the time to walk at a leisurely pace, chatting quietly. My favorite moment of the observation was seeing an elderly couple in their 70's walking slowly around the lake holding hands, as if they were the only ones there.

There were many beautiful canine companions walking around the lake as well. They ranged from small lap dogs to some very large pets. Most walked calmly with their people, but one large pit bull ran the circuit with his athletic owner at an exhausting pace. Most of the dogs and owners walked one lap or less, and left the park after a few minutes.

At one point, about midway through the observation hour, there was no one in sight, and I could focus on the sounds of the park. I was able to filter out the sounds of the cars passing on the main road alongside the lake, and enjoy the sounds of nature. The air was full of the sound of

sparrows singing, and of a single noisy blue jay. Even though it was broad daylight, the crickets chirped in the woods near my seat, as the sun never penetrated the thick canopy of leaves. This brief reflective moment was disrupted when a noisy motorcycle drove by several feet from where I sat.

Another source of disruption was the use of cell phones in speaker mode. Two different men were using speaker phones as they walked. One of them spent nearly the entire hour on his phone, much of it in the gazebo. His conversations were very animated and loud. Only one teenager was seen with a cell phone in her hand, and she appeared to be Face Timing with a friend while she walked.

I noticed a vast difference in the activity of the single persons who utilized the park on that Sunday afternoon. Some of them walked, at various paces ranging from slow to quite brisk. There were three runners who stood out in my mind, as they attacked the path at a quick pace, and continued to run multiple laps at full speed. The first, a man in a blue shirt, approximately 30 years old, ran several laps at full speed while I was watching, but from the look of his clothing had started before I arrived. A woman in her 30's, also in a blue shirt, jogged and ran for 5 laps, or about 3.5 miles. The most impressive performance was delivered by a woman in her 20's in a grey tee-shirt, who ran 9 laps while I was there. She may have started before I arrived, so she ran at least 6.3 miles.

Another thing I noticed was the varying dress of the visitors to the park. The clothing ranged from trendy spandex exercise wear, to bright track suits. Some patrons wore regular street clothes, others wore tee-shirts and shorts. One woman wore a beautiful, flowing blouse, and a Muslim family was spotted where the women wore headscarves and floor-length skirts. The

variation in dress was as diverse as the variation in activities that was observed throughout the hour.

Analysis

Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011) describe coding as the process of asking questions of the data collected in the fieldnotes. With this in mind, the next step in the observation process was to read the fieldnotes, asking questions such as “what were the participant’s wearing?” and “what was the purpose of this patron’s visit to the park?” Using an open coding method, there were not set categories at the time of the observation, but the data revealed the categories as it was reviewed and analyzed. The questions yielded different answers, which contributed to the development of themes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011, p. 177). The coding for this observation is detailed in Table 1, below.

Table 1

Coding

Observations	Coding
I began the observation at 3:30 pm, and the first person I saw was a man trying to retrieve his toddler son from the gazebo.	Family/children Casual
Several other families disappeared from my sight as they made their way to the playground. In two different cases, little girls were so excited to get to the play structure that they bounded along the path, followed by their adult companions who moved at a much slower pace. Some of the boys rode razor scooters along the path, while others stayed close to their parents as they walked to the southern end of the park.	Family/children Casual

Many pairs of walkers were spotted throughout the hour, strolling along and carrying on animated conversations.	Leisure/social Casual, animated
Some intense couples walked briskly, side by side, without speaking, as if they were concentrating on maximizing their exercise	Fitness Fashion/Workout
Other couples used the time to walk at a leisurely pace, chatting quietly.	Leisure/social Casual
My favorite moment of the observation was seeing an elderly couple in their 70's walking slowly around the lake holding hands, as if they were the only ones there.	Leisure/social Casual
There were many beautiful canine companions walking around the lake as well. They ranged from small lap dogs to some very large pets.	Dog walk Casual
Most walked calmly with their people, but one large pit bull ran the circuit with his athletic owner at an exhausting pace.	Dog walk, Fitness Shorts & Tee
Most of the dogs and owners walked one lap or less, and left the park.	Dog walk Casual
I was able to filter out the sounds of the cars passing on the main road alongside the lake,	Road
The air was full of the sound of sparrows singing, and of a single noisy blue jay. Even though it was broad daylight, the crickets chirped in the woods near my seat, as the sun never penetrated the thick canopy of leaves.	Nature

<p>Another source of disruption was the use of cell phones in speaker mode. Two different men were using speaker phones as they walked. One of them spent nearly the entire hour on his phone, much of it in the gazebo. His conversations were very animated and loud.</p>	<p>Disruptive</p>
<p>This brief reflective moment was disrupted when a noisy motorcycle drove by several feet from where I sat.</p>	<p>Road</p>
<p>Only one teenager was seen with a cell phone in her hand, and she appeared to be Face Timing with a friend while she walked.</p>	<p>Casual</p>
<p>I noticed a vast difference in the activity of the single persons who utilized the park on that Sunday afternoon. Some of them walked, at various paces ranging from slow to quite brisk.</p>	<p>Casual</p>
<p>There were three runners who stood out in my mind, as they attacked the path at a quick pace, and continued to run multiple laps at full speed. The first, a man in a blue shirt, approximately 30 years old, ran several laps at full speed while I was watching, but from the look of his clothing had started before I arrived.</p>	<p>Serious training Shorts & Tee</p>
<p>A woman in her 30's, also in a blue shirt, jogged and ran for 5 laps, or about 3.5 miles.</p>	<p>Serious training Shorts & Tee</p>
<p>The most impressive performance was delivered by a woman in her 20's in a grey tee-shirt, who ran 9 laps while I was there. She may have started before I arrived, so she ran at least 6.3 miles.</p>	<p>Serious training Shorts & Tee</p>
<p>The clothing ranged from trendy spandex exercise wear, to bright track suits. Some patrons wore regular street clothes, others wore tee-</p>	<p>Fashion/Workout, Casual</p>

<p>shirts and shorts. One woman wore a beautiful, flowing blouse, and a Muslim family was spotted where the women wore headscarves and floor-length skirts.</p>	
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Description of codes:

Purpose of visit: Serious training, fitness, leisure/social, family/children, dog walk

Clothing: Shorts & Tee, Fashion/Workout, Casual

Sounds: Nature, Disruptive, Road

Parks Lake is a local landmark in the Rockaways, a multiple use park with a .7-mile lighted walking path, a beach area, and a playground. Rockaway Township does not have a Main Street or downtown area, so the gazebo at Parks Lake takes on the role of the center of town for many activities. The township sponsors a series of live concerts every summer, and wedding parties are often seen posing for portraits at the venue.

On Sunday, October 1, I observed the patrons of this park for one hour, to understand how residents use this facility. When the park was first developed, over 20 years ago, I would walk there several times per week. At that time, most patrons I encountered used the park in the same manner. They would walk two or three laps, and go back to their vehicle. I have not used the park personally in recent years, although my husband will often go for a walk there in the evening. I pass the park frequently when I drive into town, and it is always busy, day and night. I wanted to understand how the park was being used currently.

My first impression was that there were a lot of people in the park at 3:30 on Sunday afternoon. The parking lot was always full while I was there, and there were always cars parked in the unofficial overflow parking at the American Legion hall. Even though there were a lot of

people present, the park did not feel crowded at any point. The patrons were dispersed throughout the facility, and were able to coexist despite the variety of their activities.

There were, as I expected based on past experiences in the park, quite a few “fitness walkers”, persons who were walking at a brisk pace, completing two or three laps. These walkers were generally dressed in track suits or casual clothing, and were focused on their exercise. Even when these walkers were in pairs, there was very little conversation.

There were several surprises for me, based on past experience. The first was the number of serious runners using the park for their workout. In that single hour, I observed four of these runners, who all completed five or more laps at a fast pace. One woman completed nine laps while I was there, for a total of 6.3 miles. They were all dressed similarly, in shorts and tee-shirts, and appeared to be in their 20’s and 30’s. Each of these runners was completely focused on his or her workout.

At the other end of the spectrum, there were many pairs of patrons using the walking path to meet and socialize. They ranged in age from groups in their 20’s to some in their 60’s. Their pace could be described as a stroll, and they were all engaged in conversation. Some of these patrons were dressed in workout clothing, while others were dressed in casual wear. There were also several single persons strolling, who appeared to be using the park to be outdoors in nature, without a specific fitness goal.

A number of families arrived at the park during my observation. Five families walked to the playground area and only one returned while I was present. There has always been playground equipment at the park, but since I was a patron 20 years ago, Rockaway Borough has installed an attractive, modern playground. It was nice to see so many children playing outdoors on a sunny Sunday.

Another observation that surprised me was the number of patrons who were walking their dogs at the park. Most of the five dogs I saw during my observation left the park after a few minutes. The notable exception was one pit bull, who ran alongside his owner for his entire serious workout. According to the park regulations, leashed pets are permitted, as long as owners clean up after them (Rockaway Township Facilities, 2017).

There were many limitations to this observation that must be noted. There were a lot of people to observe, and they were all in motion. It was difficult to note their attire, age, and gather clues to the purpose of their visit. It would have been helpful to have another observer present to assist. I was also not able to hear conversations, only a random word or two. For the most part, I characterized their conversations based on body language and gestures.

Another limitation was that the observation was for a single hour in a single day. To collect meaningful data about the use of the park, it would be necessary to repeat this observation in other seasons, at other times of day, and during various weather conditions. It would also be interesting to see if there was any change in the park use patterns when there was a food truck in the parking lot. There is a food truck onsite in the afternoon to early evening hours, six days per week. It would be interesting to see if this food truck brings more patrons to the park, who move to a bench or the gazebo to enjoy their meal.

The observation yielded a significant alignment between the patron's attire, amount of interaction with others, and my perception of the purpose of their visit to the park. It was very interesting to see the diverse ways each of the groups of patrons experienced the park. From running, to fitness, to socializing, each of the patrons was able to experience nature and the park in his or her own way.

References

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